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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: The Case Against Estimates of Soviet Vulnerabilities

1. The desire has been expressed recurrently in the intelligence community and among some of our consumers for a national estimate on Soviet vulnerabilities. This desire appears motivated at least partly by the belief that our Soviet estimates present too monolithic a picture of Soviet strength, in which weaknesses have not been sufficiently pointed out. In addition, various operational purposes could be served by a specialized vulnerability paper. However, for a number of reasons the Board of National Estimates believes that a national estimate of Soviet vulnerabilities would be methodologically unsound, and probably deceptive.

2. Our principal reason for this belief is that a vulnerability connotes an operational rather than a factual condition. It is not a weakness per se but an exploitable weakness, the exploitability of which changes with circumstances and with the capabilities of the exploiter. Thus a weakness may cease to be exploitable and another may become exploitable, or the degree of exploitability may vary. Therefore, it is almost impossible to estimate a vulnerability with any confidence unless detailed assumptions regarding Western exploitative capabilities and objectives are given. Since each vulnerability problem is unique, defined by its own peculiar circumstances, general assumptions can hardly be employed as a basis for an estimate. Consequently, vulnerability is a concept which is properly in the province of operational people who have available to them not only the intelligence studies of Soviet weaknesses but also knowledge of US capabilities to exploit them.

3. While NIE's, which by their nature are brief, generalized products designed for a high policy audience, do not contain detailed analyses of Communist weaknesses, our numerous estimates of

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Bloc capabilities have not neglected to point them out. NIE 11-4-54, for example, discusses the following weaknesses: top level instability, failures in economic planning, low productivity, discontent in the USSR, low living standards, constant state control and surveillance, peasant discontent, shortcomings in Bloc military establishments, Satellite disaffection, low morale, housing and manpower problems, certain Bloc dependence on trade with the West, divisive forces in Sino-Soviet relations, and others. We have also discussed the weaknesses of the various Communist parties and organizations abroad in our various regional and country estimates.

4. However, we believe it would be seriously misleading to discuss such weaknesses in a separate paper on vulnerabilities. In the first place, by listing them separately we run the risk of magnifying them out of proportion. When they are discussed in our regular Bloc papers, the compensating strength or checks in the Soviet system are presented simultaneously and the reader is placed in a position to evaluate the weaknesses more correctly. In the second place, to discuss weaknesses separately under the heading of vulnerabilities is to imply that we are talking about exploitable weaknesses. The fact is that not all weaknesses which might be listed would be exploitable by means available to the US and therefore could not properly be regarded as vulnerabilities. While there exist many weaknesses within the Soviet system which are theoretically exploitable (e.g., low living standards, anti-Russian sentiments of the Satellite peoples, abuse of police power), the authority of a totalitarian police state as firmly entrenched in power as the Kremlin is unlikely to be seriously impaired by psychological pressures and inducements. Nor is the Soviet system conducive to resistance by disaffected citizens. From a psychological warfare point of view at least, the exploitability of the numerous weaknesses in the Soviet state should not be overestimated, and we feel that we are doing a service to our consumers by placing them in the proper context even at the risk of giving an impression of "monolithic strength."

5. Finally, we believe that the mass of technical details which would have to be discussed in any useful Bloc weakness analysis belong rather in the field of operational research than


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in a generalized national estimate. In view of these considerations, we believe that an over-all NIE on Soviet vulnerabilities would not be a useful exercise.

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Acting Assistant Director  
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